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ABSTRACT

Contact zone theory--spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other--helps writing program administrators to situate themselves. Writing programs and composition courses seem most troubled where the viewpoint of the most powerful faction is assumed as "the" viewpoint. One way to defuse tension is to recognize that writing is not exclusively the domain of the English or composition department; writing occurs within a specific context or discipline. But what happens when the teaching of first-year composition is given to such departments as music, government, and psychology as well as to English? First, educators in disciplines other than English start thinking about writing in ways they might not have before. Second, if given not only advice and training but also freedom and responsibility, instructors, whether graduate students or faculty, will rise to the occasion. Third, writing courses take on a plethora of agendas and subject matters which meet the wide-ranging tastes and needs of the student body. Faculty benefit as they begin to see the teaching of writing as something more than the conveyance of skills and correct grammar. Students benefit by experiencing writing as part of their normal intellectual and emotional lives, by gaining direct familiarity with writing as it occurs in different arenas. Dangers exist, however, because some faculty, who value content over process, will treat writing as an afterthought, and because some graduate students do not write well themselves and have not thought about writing. (TB)

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CONTACT ZONES: COMPOSITION'S CONTENT IN THE UNIVERSITY

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It's *de rigeur* –and right–these days to situate ourselves in relation to our topic before beginning our discussion. My topic, "Contact Zones: Composition's Content in the University," in fact arose out of the questions I face because of my "situatedness." To be specific: I run a first-year composition program at a big university. The courses are taught by graduate students, lecturers, and faculty in about thirty departments and programs, Africana Studies to Women's Studies. The subjects of the courses are developed within these 30 departments and disciplines; we offer about 100 different topics a semester. The composition courses serve students from six colleges, Agriculture to Arts. The courses serve not just the teachers and students in the courses but other teachers who will have these students in later years and, presumably, the people for whom they will work after graduation. I try to coordinate all this–about 170 sections and 170 teachers a semester, about 3000 students. I also try to coordinate all the interests represented in and outside the courses at the university with what I learn from the composition world, its theories, its practices.

Questions confront me: they arise as I try to run the program; they are presented by those trying to understand how it works. (I include myself.) The questions are theoretical, pedagogical, political: Isn't there one "best" content or theory of content that can guide all teachers? Who should teach composition courses, with what content? Can and should non-experts teach composition courses? What should comp courses teach about writing? Should there be a consistent body of information taught in all sections? What can everyone learn about language and share with their students? What guidelines should all instructors follow? And why am I so bothered by being given "the right answer" to what the "best" theory of composition's content might be? Finally, and crucially, why do I (and I suspect, many of

CS215112

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you) so often resist admirable proposals, whether from social constructionists, expressivists, or whoever, even when I'm in sympathy with their positions?

An approach that has helped me pull together what I have learned from my particular situatedness–a situatedness I think more or less shared by many administrators or writing programs–is contact zone theory. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term "to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today . . ." (*Arts*, 34); with this term, she can "reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing . . . " (*Arts*, 34). In composition, as I think many of you may agree, we're more likely to feel the effects of contact zones than is almost any other discipline, given that we occupy space in virtually every other field in vivid, day-to-day ways. For the purposes of this exploration, then, I'm considering composition classes as contact zone communities in which cultures "meet, clash, and grapple," cultures including the administration of the writing program, staff who teach the comp courses, the students who take them, the faculty in the many departments, the administration of the university, and the world outside the university. The power structures are assuredly often "highly asymmetrical."

I've observed that writing programs and composition courses seem most troubled where contact zone realities are not usefully recognized, where the viewpoint of the most powerful faction is assumed as "the" viewpoint (in Pratt's terms, the zone is assumed to be homogenous). It's under these conditions that the question of proper composition content can become most bitter and repression rife. It's perhaps not too fanciful for our purposes to portray first-year composition courses and their students as often the victims of uncritical colonization, positioned on the feeble end of highly asymmetrical relations of power. Geographically isolated or marginalized, the composition offices are located by administrative powers in the poorest accommodations (not infrequently basements). Members of an underdeveloped nation, staff are paid at substandard rates designed to suit the

needs of the colonizing nations who "can't afford" to treat them better, and who won't locate the classes in their own "country," using their own citizens to teach them. Composition course content becomes subject to the dictation of other departments and/or the administration who think they know what is best for composition classes, teachers, and their students (they may want to dictate content or have outsiders decide whether students have passed the course). Language "belongs" to the industrialized nations; composition courses are the country where students prepare for entry into civilized territory. Composition teachers, however, are not expected to leave, although it's assumed that they would like to "escape." Everyone is unhappy: faculty and administration believe that the writing program doesn't teach "service skills" well enough, students are angry at having to spend time in this third world of study, composition administration and staff struggle constantly to gain some power (funding, classrooms, staff), to teach courses in the ways they believe to be best, to do their work well in the context of the university, and on their own terms.

What help can insights from the contact zone approach give us with this situation? We cannot eliminate, and should not want to eliminate, all the "nations" who merge in the composition classroom and affect its content. The question is how best to take them into account. Pratt tells us that the contact perspective "treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" (*Imperial Eyes* 7). I would argue that we can capitalize on interaction and copresence, on interlocking understandings and practices and in so doing situate composition and its content more favorably and usefully in the university, along the way disturbing or eliminating the debilitating asymmetrical relations which I've described above and which exist in far too many institutions.

Can composition courses find ways in which to capitalize on "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" in regard to composition's content? It is not only possible but urgent to do so, for a number of reasons. Before looking at these, however, we

might observe that something stands in the way of improved interaction, namely that writing programs, writing teachers, compositionists, have a tendency to fall prey to the very colonizing tendencies that they condemn. I've noted that, while often extremely careful to provide our students with enabling contact zones, in other areas, given the chance, we'd like to be colonizers and oppressors ourselves–even while we're often struggling with our own oppression. The composition nation, we notice, has a wonderful export product, and maybe we could take over the university with it, if we could just wrest away the power from those other departments and administrators that currently keep us poor and subservient. We want to tell each of our composition teachers what to teach; we want to tell other departments just what their students ought to know about writing, and possibly how those departments ought to clean up their own writing in the process. Fortunately, I've repeatedly experienced my own resistance to being told in peremptorially what I should be doing: this is right, that's wrong, how can you think any other way? I instantly become a subversive contact zone rebel. What about *my* particular interests? *My* areas of expertise? And fortunately, I've also faced the tempation to try to "colonize" thirty some departments. I can assure you it can't, and, more important, shouldn't, be done, for the gains that take place when composition forces work together, with and for each other, are tremendous. No more than we should ignore the "cultural capital" of each student should we ignore the cultural capital of teachers, in or out of the field of composition, the cultural capital of the departments and faculty that depend on composition courses and that can in fact offer them. Just as we want to work *with* students, we should want to work *with*, not just within or for, the university.

At this point I should acknowledge that, like many others, I believe teaching writing cannot successfully be separated from teaching within a larger context, usually a disciplinary one. "All approaches to writing instruction are at bottom social" (185), says David Russell: ". . . growth in writing means that students would move toward acquiring the genres, the habits of discourse, the voices of social groups involved in organized activities *while* students more and more fully participate in (either directly or vicariously) the activities of those

groups and eventually contribute to and transform them–not *before* they participate in them." (186) The best social contexts for such growth in writing, I believe, are the most typical "organized activities" at a university in which writing occurs and in which students participate, namely those located in its many disciplines, in classrooms with teachers well versed in the subjects students must learn, and learn to write about.

For the most benefit to the university, to students and teachers alike, then, I believe that the content for composition, and the teachers of composition should be situated in the disciplines, as well as in writing departments[1] or English (where, of course, the actual subject may be literature or cultural theory). Composition must be so situated if writing is to be convincingly learned, if it is to be convincingly taught, and if the university (meaning here both teachers and students) is to claim the teaching and learning of writing as its own, not as a skill delegated to a marginal department, not as a skill that means grammar. All the cultures merging in the composition class need a structure in which to interact and to create change and growth.

But what happens when you actually give the teaching of first-year composition courses to departments such as music, government, and psychology, as well as to English and the Writing Program? How can this work, and work well? Here is what I have learned from observing a program in which only forty percent of the courses are taught by the English Department. The first observation concerns writing and teachers of composition in the "non-writing" disciplines: People working in fields other than English already are interested in writing, and know about it. Most are immersed in critical reading and writing, whether as researchers or as teachers: writing is already an integral part of these contact zones. We compositionists shouldn't hasten to these departments thinking of ourselves as the bearers of enlightenment and knowledge; we need to listen and co-operate, not co-opt. Co-opting won't work–it simply perpetuates repression–and, more important, we miss hearing what "in

[1]Composition classes offered by Writing Programs often have their own subject matters. With Patricia Bizzell, however, I believe that "the writing process" is not usually an adequate subject matter. (See her "Theories of Content.")

the field" practitioners and theorists know, or, with some guidance from us, will discover–often discoveries that we couldn't make ourselves. I've also noticed that if instructors aren't already thinking about the nature of writing in their discipline–and its connection to learning the discipline–they're often eagerly open to investigation of the subject. It's interesting that instructors in the "non-writing disciplines" are frequently willing to learn about writing in a more experimental and adventurous way than are those in English (who may think they already know everything a writing program can teach them).

Second, concerning how the system works for instructors. I have learned that yes, education–advice, training–is vitally needed, and plenty of it, but primarily we should trust our teachers, whether faculty or graduate students. Give them not just guidelines and information but freedom and responsibility for a course, and they will rise to the occasion. As Sharon Crowley has argued so forcibly, academic freedom shouldn't be for the benefit only of the already empowered (167-68). In any case, few people enjoy teaching badly, but the worst work I see often comes from TAs who have to use someone else's plan. Give them a chance to design their own writing course, and they do beautifully. This should not surprise us. Would you prefer to be the colonizer or the colonized? to cultivate and benefit from your own strengths and skills or to have to conform to someone else's preferences and talents? Where do you put your greater efforts? We who are in charge may not like every course we see, every method chosen–I don't–but I no longer pretend to think I have the right answer for every teacher, student, subject, goal, situation. Further, with training and encouragement, some of the most innovative, excellent course designs have arisen from faculty and graduate students in disciplines far afield from English. At Cornell we have just awarded an internal fellowship to a composition course proposal from the Division of Biological Sciences. One of the most engaged TAs I worked with this fall taught in Plant Pathology. History and government produce some of the most concerned teachers of writing. With their experience in teaching composition based in their own subjects, they proslytize more effectively than I ever could for the integration of writing and learning.

Third, concerning how such a system works for students. We don't need to be reminded that not all students are the same–many theories of composition's content are based on concern for diversity, on the need to design courses that recognize and work from each student's cultural capital (see, for example, Bizzell) And yet we so often try to put students into the same course, as though one course is going to be suitable for several thousand students and as though students have no valid insight into what study they should do. Writing courses have a unique opportunity, compared to some disciplines, to allow students to be active participants in terms of choosing which part of the composition terrain they choose to inhabit. Do they need or prefer expressive writing? Are they interested in a course that teaches them to be "effective communicators in a multicultural democracy, the United States" (Bizzell, 8) or in another that "offers guided practice in reading and writing the discourses of the academy and the professions" (Lindemann 312)? I've had the opportunity to talk with students who have been offered such choices through our program, and it may hearten you to know that they often choose wisely, for their own particular needs. Some want to experience writing in a field other than science if that's already their major and they're already writing it it, so they pick a Shakespeare course; others, buried in abstract impersonal subjects, choose Writing about Personal Experience, and are wise to do so. This writing may indeed provide just the kind of release and self-knowledge that they need. Some students agree with James Moffett that "The main issues in writing, after all, concern the composing of the inner life" (260). They know they'll do plenty of more formal analytical writing elsewhere. Even when a student's choice is based on what I would call a "bad" reason ("I want a course that doesn't have much reading"), the reason matters to the student, and may, when considered less impersonally, that is, in terms of the student's particular "situatedness," even have some merit to it.

What results from giving instructors and students enriched, improved opportunities for "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices"? I've observed one major benefit, namely that (at Cornell, at least) departments that themselves offer

composition courses are less apt to consider writing to be a matter of grammar; and they are therefore less likely to place the responsibility for teaching and assigning writing elsewhere. This understanding can come about because of the training teachers must go through and from on-going frequent experience with students and their texts, which may not take place with such intensity at any other level. The faculty most apt to think of writing as a matter of correctness and "skills" are those who do not teach writing and who have not had to think about how to integrate writing into their courses in ways that help students both to learn and to learn to write. The more we integrate responsibility for the teaching of writing throughout the university, the more we can change the institution's idea about writing, and, more important, our students' ideas about the nature of writing.

And how do the students benefit? By experiencing writing as part of their normal intellectual or even emotional lives, by gaining direct familiarity with writing as it occurs in different arenas. I believe that providing students with writing experiences embedded in disciplines helps to prepare them for the varied writing situations, all of which will be equally embedded, that they will encounter during their college years and after graduation. Students do, after all, transfer learning experiences: "human beings can consciously apply experience from one set of activities (discipline or community) to another set of activities (discipline or community)" (Russell 189). It seems to me a good thing, then, that at Cornell virtually all students must take two writing seminars, which practically guarantees them two intensively different experiences. One semester a student may analyze modern photography, the next she may study women's stories. The demands are different, and so the student experiences writing as it is woven into the complex but normal experience of thinking and communicating within two different subjects. There is plenty of room here for the student to learn how writing is situated in different fields and how to negotiate that terrain.

Are there hazards involved in assigning responsibility for writing courses to "non-writing" departments? Are there dangers involved in encouraging innovation in course design from non-experts, rather than relying on one or several set syllabi? Indeed yes, and

here are some I regularly encounter, although I'll say now that I believe the dangers to be overbalanced by the benefits. First, there are the instructors who can't be pried away from the concept of content coverage: writing gets stuck in as an afterthought. Even a requirement for how much writing has to be done in each seminar will not prevent failure to teach writing. But is this kind of bad teaching limited to non-English or Writing Program composition courses? Indeed no. In fact, Erika Lindemann and others have argued about the dangers of literature as a too distracting/ disruptive subject for composition courses. The danger can inhere even in a course called the "Practice of Prose," which I happen to teach. If you don't want to think about language and about writing, you'll concentrate on "content," wherever you can locate it. The danger isn't worth throwing out the baby with the bathwater. There will be some bad teachers no matter what you do.

Second: Isn't it risky to have inexperienced teachers, say graduate students, from non "writing" fields, design their own seminars? or untenured part-timers? Yes, if they don't write well, haven't ever given much thought to language or writing, and don't want to now; then they shouldn't teach, and yes, some selectivity is needed. The pickings may be sparser in some disciplines than others. Furthermore, institutions should not hire adjuncts at the last minute who have no time to prepare to teach–don't we all wish. But many graduate students and adjuncts can write, do think–have even thought in the past–and can be given time to prepare and to receive training. As I've argued earlier, the disenfranchised flourish with some franchisement. Further, graduate students are a lot more likely to be trained by you, and to be receptive to training, than is the assistant professor whom the English department just hired. Graduate students in many disciplines are eager to elicit some good evaluations and welcome the opportunity to design a course themselves. It goes on their resumes for that job search that's coming up; it prepares them for excellent teaching elsewhere. As for faculty from non-writing disciplines, tempting them to the investigation of writing by encouraging them to explore writing within the fields they love may lead them to discover the pleasures of actually knowing students through their writing, to experience the pain of discovering, again

through that writing, that they hadn't taught what they thought they had, and perhaps even to decide to use more writing in their other courses because they've tried it in the seminar and discovered its importance. Better by far to make writing the responsibility of every possible field and suffer through the occasionally horrible content course than to let departments say: That's not my job. *You* teach them the skills.

And a third, especially inflamatory hazard of composition across the curriculum: how do we know what the courses are teaching? How can we be sure students are prepared for academic writing in their other courses? Don't we have to have some consistent rules? Shouldn't every composition section emphasize, for example, documentation, or argument, or audience? In this area our urge for uniformity, for a homogenous approach, can be particularly strong. Indeed, our own writing course evaluation at Cornell includes questions about possible topics we rather fervently hope the seminars may have taught: use of evidence, awareness of audience, and so on. But do even professional compositionists agree about what "elements" of writing ought to appear in every composition course? We all know the answer to that question. I prefer to help instructors learn about the possibilities and the bases on which they might make their choices and then encourage them to work out a plan that fits within the context of their discipline, their personality and experience, their students' needs–and these may vary from semester to semester. In other words, a little contact zone theory: here are the players–how can you co-operate, practice, interact? The result may not be consistency–students can't expect to learn exactly the same things about writing in every seminar–but isn't that the point? Isn't that the impossibility–to hope that one composition course can prepare a student for writing in every situation? The consistency I hope for and that my program tries to insist on is basic: continued and intensive attention to language; limited reading so that there is time and space for student writing. A quantitative approach can make an adequate place to start: if everyone must assign at least six new topics for essays in a semester, must request at least two major rewrites, and cannot assign more than 75 pages of reading at the very most in a week, teachers are propelled into a course in which (we hope) they're bound to contemplate writing. Indeed,

the training they receive encourages them to discover their own way to integrate the teaching of writing into the study of the subject, with writing assignments that form a logical sequence. Happily we receive evidence that this kind of teaching occurs in abundance, perhaps because it's what students want and often what learning a subject requires. Insist that writing is present as a major player, and usually action will follow.[2]

In a recent essay, Kenneth Bruffee quotes philosopher and educator Cornel West as saying that "once one gives up on the search for foundations and the quest for certainty, human inquiry into truth and knowledge shifts to the social and communal circumstances under which persons can communicate and cooperate in the process of acquiring knowledge" (18). Writing is firmly located in shifting social and communal circumstances, firmly embedded in highly charged, active contact zones in which the quest for knowledge proceeds. Can our own quest for a theory of composition's content succeed? By definition, not, but the quest cannot stop. If we are to make the most of "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices," we must constantly seek the better understanding, the better practice, even while knowing we will never find the one best answer: not for ourselves, and certainly not for anyone else. Perhaps this is the one generally acceptable theory of content for composition.

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[2]There's a "basic composition" course I do wish universities would offer regularly: writing in the university would be its subject. As you're aware by now, I do not think this is usually an appropriate choice for freshman, who haven't experienced writing in context. "Writing in the University" would be offered to seniors, who have experienced writing throughout the university for four years (we hope). Seniors, as more sophisticated players, are much more ready to think about the contact zones of which they've been an active part. Do as Gerald Graff recommends: teach the conflicts after students have been immersed in them; now is the time to help students share in our observations about writing and discourse, writing and diversity. Here is a cultural capital on which we should call when it is at its most fully developed.

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